

A Critique of the Royal Academy of Arts London Abstract Expressionism Show (2016)

By Bethany Thomas

Recently I went to visit the Royal Academy of Arts in London to see the Abstract Expressionism show that runs from 24 September 2016 – 2 January 2017. This exhibition looks at the abstract expressionist movement and indeed at some of the “most celebrated art of the past century” (Royal Academy of Arts, 1953). 163 works in total were assembled for this show, including works by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhart, Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still. While I enjoyed aspects of this show it did have some hard to ignore pitfalls.

As I entered the gallery I was offered a multimedia headset, which I accepted as I wanted to experience the gallery as the curators (Dr David Anfam and Edith Devaney) had intended. The first set didn't work, already off to a poor start. As I walked into the first room, helpfully titled ‘Introduction and Early Work,’ I was hit with a wall of people attempting to work these headsets, not even looking at the art. Once I had got the headset working it started introducing me to the early work of the abstract expressionist movement, which while interesting was distracting me from the actual art work that I had come to see. The headsets would have been great if they had been a guided tour of the entire gallery not just a look at one or two pieces. I stopped using them pretty quickly as I wanted to see the art how the artists had intended and interpret it for myself rather than being told how to feel about the work by a voice in my ears.

The second thing I noticed with the rooms was how crammed they were, both with people and with pieces of artwork. One critic called the exhibition “Overloaded and erratic” (Searle 2016) a sentiment I share. I could barely move without intercepting someone else, making the actual act of viewing an entire painting strenuous, the hordes of people were most likely caused by the sheer amount of work in each room, there was nowhere I could look without being subjected to another brightly painted canvas. My eyes started to burn after around 5 minutes of being in the first room, there was so much to look at. Now normally you want to be shown a large body of work, after all that's why we go to art galleries however in this case it was just painful – I wanted to spend time looking at each piece and

focusing on the work of one artist at a time, this was near impossible because of the layout of the rooms and how the paintings were hung. “Abstract paintings lose their force of personality when strung like washing on a line, each canvas deactivating the next” (Cummings 2016) I agree wholeheartedly with this statement the works started to become boring and predictable I knew what I would probably be seeing in the next room as there was not a lot of variation. I enjoyed the rooms with less work in and the first room more than the others as I had time to take the art in and appreciate it. The layout was different from room to room, the basic format however was the same, with around 5 pieces on each wall and an installation work in the middle of the room.

I had just gotten over the sheer amount of work in the rooms when I managed to get close to one of the works: ‘*Mandres*’ by Joan Mitchell (1962). After I had looked at the work for a while and decided I liked the piece I wanted to find out more about it so I decided to record the name of the work and the artist by reading little plaque next to the work, only to find that the font size must have been about 8, I did write the name down eventually only I thought the plaque read Madness and as the work was in a room full of Sam Francis paintings I also recorded the wrong artist. It was only afterwards in the shop when I bought a postcard of the work I noticed I had managed to misread the name. I assume the plaques are small so they don’t distract from the work however they still need to be readable so the work can be referred easily and so the gallery doesn’t end up with large groups of people huddled around a tiny plaque instead of looking at the work.

The element that irritated me the most was how some of the works were presented. A large amount of the work by Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt such as ‘*Profile of Light*’ (Newman 1967) were shown behind glass which ruins them. The work by Ad Reinhardt was supposed to “condense colour to its utmost pitch” (David Anfam 2016) and while it does do that, as it is framed and encased in glass it also presents me with a lovely view of myself and the masses of other people all looking at the work which really is not what I came to see. As the paintings are behind glass I was also struggling to find a view of the work that wasn’t obscured by lights, thankfully the RA doesn’t allow photography or the flash would have made the paintings largely pointless.

The largest upside of the exhibition obviously was the work shown; large pieces by Jackson Pollock, a collection of Rothkos and many many other works (163 in total) if we ignore the frankly unplanned curation the exhibition would, should even have been breath-taking. If I was just looking at the works this would be a very different essay. As you walk in the first painting you see is Jackson Pollock's 'Blue Poles' (Figure 1) which is stunning, using Martin Gayford's words "this huge work crackles with such energy, is so crammed with eye-filling beauties, that it takes you over" (Gayford). The work shown throughout the gallery captures the movement well and presents a large amount of art, the shown perhaps should have been held in a larger venue so the work was more spaced out.



(Figure 1 – Pollock, Jackson. *Blue Poles* 1952)

The layout of the gallery was also confusing. The show has 12 rooms, which are numbered 1 – 12 and have different titles. Troublesomely there is no logical route to progress from room 7 to room 8 without either backtracking or moving to room 11, which is confusing and made me think I had lost the group of people I had entered the gallery with. Even discounting this numbering, the layout of the work wasn't very coherent, there was a Mark Rothko room (number 7) yet his works were also in rooms 1 and 9, and I managed to confuse artists work with each other as I for example was in a room with seemingly only works by Jackson Pollock then I happened to read a plaque and find that actually one of them was by Lee Krasner '*The Eye Is The First Circle*' (1960) (Figure 2). I would turn a corner expecting to see a Rothko and find a random Pollock which is quite disconcerting. Laura Cummings wrote "Paintings by artists with no natural affinities are displayed like slideshow examples" (Cummings 2016) and that "there are disastrous...groupings" some of the works simply do not fit

together, how the viewer sees one painting effects how they see the next one, it's hard not to compare works in your head. Ad Reinhardt said "My paintings doesn't hang easily in group shows" (Reinhardt p.16). Seeing Krasner's work next to Pollock's makes her work seem simplistic and as though she is only being included as Pollock was her husband, Krasner is an artist in her own right and one of the only female abstract expressionists it would have been interesting to see her work without it being seemingly compared to Pollock.



(Figure 2 – Krasner, Lee. *The Eye Is The First Circle* 1960)

While on the subject of female artists, there wasn't enough work shown, yes there are few known women in this movement (none of the big names) the only art by women shown was work by Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, Janet Sobel and Helen Frankenthaler who as Adrian Searle points out "was never really an abstract expressionist" anyway – the work that is shown by them is small and is loomed over by other works meaning it is left unappreciated. As one critic noted "the London show may disappoint those who want to reset the inclusiveness button in regard to gender equity" (Freudenheim, 2016).

In the last room (titled Late Work) we see work by some lesser known artists like William Baziotes and Joan Mitchell. David Anfam (in the gallery guide) uses the term "out with a bang" (David Anfam 2016) to describe the room, I can only assume he is referring to sharp and swift way the movement petered out. The last room seems smaller than the rest, almost like an afterthought it's quite bare

Name: Bethany Thomas, **Tutor:** Tom Baugh, **Module:** 405

compared to the other rooms and ends the exhibition on a low note. The final room with its rather washed out and indeed played out works demonstrates quite clearly why the movement ended, the work was simply no longer new, interesting or good. Jackson Pollock once said “No more galleries ever! I’ll sell them myself or keep them. It doesn’t matter which.” (Rodman p.78) a sentiment which I think relates well to this show. While yes it was a good show and presented a large collection of work as Adrian Searle said “I wanted to see it (abstract expressionism) in some new and instructive way, but I didn’t.” The exhibition was nothing new and that is its largest downfall.

Word Count: 1638

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